

Western Forest: England's first new national forest in three decades



The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is proud to announce the Western Forest as England's first new national forest in over 30 years. Following a competitive process, the Forest of Avon charitable trust has been selected to lead this ambitious project, with Defra providing up to £7.5 million of funding over five years.

A vision for nature recovery

The Western Forest will transform landscapes across Bristol, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire with plans to plant 20 million trees by 2050, creating at least 2,500 hectares of new woodland by 2030. This flagship initiative represents the first step in delivering the Government's manifesto commitment to create three new national forests during this parliament.

Nature Minister Mary Creagh said: "We will plant 20 million trees in the Western Forest to bring nature closer to people, prevent flooding and support wildlife."

Trees are at the forefront of the Government's plans to reduce emissions, help reverse biodiversity loss and create thousands of green jobs while better connecting communities with nature. The Western Forest will contribute directly to halting species decline by 2030, reaching carbon emission reduction targets of net zero by 2050, and protecting 30% of land for nature.

A partnership approach

The Western Forest is a partnership led by the Forest of Avon, working with partners across the public, private and third sector including England's Community Forests, West of England Combined Authority, local authorities, Cotswolds and Mendips National Landscape, and the Forestry Commission.

Alex Stone, chief executive, Forest of Avon Trust, said: "The Forest of Avon is thrilled to have led a wonderfully diverse and engaged partnership to bring the Western Forest to life. This is about resource, funding and expertise coming directly to landowners, partners and communities, planting millions of trees in the right places. Together, we will enhance landscapes for all to enjoy, improving the lives of our 2.5 million residents and visitors to the region.

"Encompassing two of England's Community Forests and working alongside the National Forest Company and Defra, the Western Forest will enhance, connect and improve our urban and rural landscapes, support investment into the region, create jobs and skills opportunities and bring the endless benefits we get back from planting and caring for our trees. It is a very exciting time for this region, and we look forward to helping shape what the Western Forest will become."

The National Forest Company will provide crucial mentorship to the Western Forest team, drawing on their 30 years of successful woodland creation experience. They've already transformed a post-industrial Midlands landscape, increasing woodland cover from 6% to more than 25%.

Supporting rural communities and urban development

With 73% of land within the new national forest's zone of potential for tree-planting being agricultural, farmers will have the opportunity to work with the new Western Forest to improve the productivity, biodiversity, water quality and climate resilience on their land through agroforestry and other woodland creation offers. This will help farmers integrate trees into their landscape through agroforestry and farm woodlands, without compromising food production.

Over the first five years, the Western Forest will focus activity across five priority areas from the rolling hills of the Cotswold National Landscape and Mendips to vibrant urban centres like Bristol, Gloucester and Swindon. These priority areas offer the greatest opportunity to deliver benefits for nature and people.

The Western Forest will also support the delivery of new homes alongside green infrastructure, working closely with partners such as the West of England Combined Authority to develop effective planning policies. It will facilitate the creation of publicly accessible green space and help mitigate flood risks for new and existing communities.

Progress towards national targets

The Western Forest will help us to progress towards our Environment Act targets, including reaching 16.5% tree canopy cover in England by 2050. Last year, England achieved its highest tree planting rate in two decades – over 5,500 hectares.

The Government has pledged up to £400 million for tree planting and peatland restoration over the current and next financial year. Additionally, the recently launched Tree Planting Taskforce will help resolve barriers to tree planting, boost biodiversity and grow the UK's forestry sector.

Looking ahead

The Western Forest builds on recent policy announcements on beaver reintroduction, changes to pesticide approaches, and measures to strengthen protected areas. Meanwhile, work is actively underway to develop options for the remaining two national forests promised in the Government's manifesto.